CFP: Pacific Populations: Fertility, Mortality and Movement in Colonial Oceania

Discussion published by Emma Thomas on Wednesday, March 2, 2022

An increasing global population has characterized modern world history, but the view from the Pacific urges an interrogation of this trend. Population and fertility decline have long been acknowledged phenomena across Oceania, signalled, for instance, by the 1922 publication of W.H.R. Rivers’ anthology Essays on the Depopulation of Melanesia. European colonial expansion, Rivers and others thought, was the key factor driving population decline in the region.

Questions about demographic data for the Pacific Islands prior to and following European ‘contact’ have engaged subsequent scholars working in fields including history, archaeology, anthropology, and the biomedical sciences. Questions about the causes and effects of population change have also endured, as scholars have weighed and debated the impacts of factors ranging from introduced diseases and epidemics to migratory (and exploitative) colonial labour regimes and alienations of indigenous lands. Colonial discourses about ‘dying races’, which frequently held Pacific Islanders (and Islander women in particular) to be responsible for their own demise, continue to demand scholarly critique. Meanwhile, Oceanians have told their own histories of epidemics and sterility-causing disease, brought to their islands by voyaging and colonizing Europeans.

This workshop, hosted by Laureate Centre for History & Population at UNSW, will bring together scholars whose research investigates the vexed histories of depopulation in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Oceania. As global climate change renders issues of migration, land, and population increasingly urgent across the Pacific World, the workshop offers an important and timely reconsideration of the decline of Pacific populations during colonial rule. Questions we will address include:

- What unique perspectives and insights do histories of Pacific Islands contribute to the history of population in the modern world? How do scholars ‘diagnose’ the causes and understand the effects of depopulation in relation to Europe’s global expansion?
- How have Pacific Islanders understood questions of sickness and health, reproduction and the family? How have indigenous knowledges and...
practices pertaining to population interacted with biopolitical medicine in colonial Oceania?

• How did strategies for discussing and dealing with depopulation in the Pacific differ and/or converge across a range of empires (European, American, and Australasian) and colonial situations (including settler colonies, plantation economies and missionary settlements)? How did these strategies engage or ignore local specificities?

• How does a critical examination of de/population enable and/or challenge us to research across a variety of scales, from the intimate, to the local, regional, and global? What are the research methodologies that allow for a critical reconsideration of depopulation in Oceania?

Key themes of this workshop include, but are not limited to:

• In/fertility
• Neonatal, maternal, and infant health
• Histories of medicine
• Environmental histories
• Indigenous medicine and family planning
• Colonial population politics and policies
• Violence
• Land and water use
• Labour, capitalism and migration
• Missionization/Christianisation
• Migrations and diasporas

This workshop will take place on 1-3 June 2023 at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, and online. An edited volume arising from the workshop will follow.

Applicants are invited to submit a paper title and abstract (300 words) and brief biography (150 words) by 15 April 2022 to emma.thomas@unsw.edu.au. Applicants will be notified in May 2022. Participants will be asked to submit a chapter draft for pre-circulation by 15 April 2023.

Pacific Islander and early career scholars are particularly encouraged to submit an abstract.
Related date:
April 15, 2022